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The Significance of the Indian in American History

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When Christopher Columbus "discovered" the Americas for Europe in 1492, numerous natives had already populated the continent. Columbus dubbed these natives Indians, a name that has endured. Estimates of their number at the time range as high as 100 million, though 10 million is a more likely total. The ensuing European invasion combined two components: disease (especially smallpox, measles, and influenza), brought into the new continent unknowingly by somewhat immune Europeans, and brutal slaughter and subjugation, deliberately imposed on the Indians. Within a couple of generations, most of the native population had been wiped out.

American history textbooks tend to overlook the contributions Indians have made to the nation's development. But for our multicultural age, Gerard Reed raises the challenging question "what is an American?" He suggests that to be an American of necessity requires one to become part Indian, "to adapt to the land, to find authentic, indigenous roots." Reed revives Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, that the frontier is the key to explaining America, and he adds Native Americans to the definition of the frontier. He takes four sample areas of Indian influence—exploration, fur trading, agriculture, and medicine—and demonstrates the importance of their contribution in down-to-earth examples. In essence, he maintains that without the Indians, the Europeans could not have survived in the Americas.

Gerard Reed writes with moral outrage at what has happened in the past, and he maintains that it is impossible to avoid moral issues when

viewing American history from an Indian vantage point. He makes a powerful case for his perspective. The author, who is himself part Indian (Cherokee and Sioux), is professor of history, philosophy, and religion at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego.

Over the past two decades, a number of scholars, many of them Native Americans, have published works drawing attention to the significance of the American Indian in American history. They suggest, first, that Indians played a significant role in shaping what is today the United States by, second, contributing uniquely *American* components to the national experience. Anecdotal and narrative accounts of American Indians have appeared since Columbus's first landfall. Western, or frontier, historians have talked about the "Indian Barrier" to Anglo-American expansion. But rarely were Natives credited with playing a formative role in the making of the nation. As scattered residents of an "empty continent," they could be ignored as irrelevant to the mainstream of American history. This essay endeavours to explore the evidence and interpretations which urge us to consider how Native Americans helped shape America.

Many of this nation's finest thinkers have tried to understand and explain what it means to be an *American*. The quest for national identity and definition surfaced two centuries ago and still continues, revealing a certain restlessness, a rootlessness which seems to haunt the nation. In 1980, Pulitzer Prize winning poet Gary Snyder highlighted "one of the key problems in American society now" as "people's lack of commitment to any given place." Like foster children, periodically moving from place to place, living in houses but aching for a home, immigrant peoples have lived on and ranged about a continent without sinking roots. What is needed, Snyder asserts, is "not even a rediscovery but a discovery of North America.... People live on it without knowing what it is or where they are. They live on it literally like invaders." So they wonder where they fit, who they are.

They say they are Americans, and they are, but what are Americans other than citizens of a nation which gives them opportunities their fathers left Europe to find, beneficiaries of the prosperity and progress, power and prestige of this nation? Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's eighteenth century question remains: what is this "new man" in America? The question has been asked, no doubt it will continue to be asked, simply because there is no clear answer. *If they did, why did Europeans become Americans? Beyond a "certain fondness for ice water,"* as Mark Twain quipped, does anything *American* uniquely stamp Americans?

That the question is asked at all is significant. Its posing exposes a lacunae in a People's sense of identity. Just as only the sick seem to fret about

health, so too the newcomers, the up-rooted aliens, the colonists grope for identity in conquered lands. Perhaps "no one," as the noted psychologist-philosopher Karl Jaspers asserts, "can change his nationality without suffering for it." A Greek, surrounded by the mountains and bathed by the Aegean's waves, knows what it means to be Greek; a Maya, born and reared in the Yucatan, knows what it means to be Maya. Those who live on the land, whose ancestors rest in the land, have a *given* identity—they simply are of the land and know they are at home. But "the white man," said Luther Standing Bear, a Sioux who lived in both the Indian and non-Indian worlds between WWI and WWII, "does not understand America. He is too far removed from its formative processes. The roots of the tree of his life have not yet grasped the rock and soil."

European immigrants tried, with one hand, to cast Europe aside, with the other hand they tried to carry her along with their luggage. They have tried to split things apart, to use the American land as Europeans, to live here and look there, and thus split the American psyche. Yet to make peace with America, to live harmoniously here, one must leave Europe not only physically but mentally, emotionally, spiritually. To be an American means to adapt to the land, to find authentic, indigenous roots. To really settle in America one must settle into, nestle into, conform oneself to the contours and configurations which make the place. Like proper plants in proper places, certain things, certain viewpoints, certain ways fit. They belong. They anchor persons, give permanence to their lives and grant culture a place to dig in.

People draw strength from their roots. For example, should one try to define the English character he would neither interview Pakistanis in London nor English settlers in Australia. Rather he would go to England, listen to the land's whispers and the people's voices, sift out her Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Norman ingredients, and study the nuances of life which typify the English. Similarly, to know what makes an American one must know what ties a person to this land, what separates him from Europe, what endures and preserves life in this most ancient, recently conquered "new world." Such knowledge begins with an understanding of an Indian presence on and adaptation to the North American continent.

Historians who have stressed America's uniqueness have listened to the land and sensed the inner truth of the "frontier thesis" set forth by Frederick Jackson Turner a century ago in his essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Quite influential in historical circles early in this century, Turner's thesis has recently suffered condemnation and neglect, though such tendencies may reveal as much about modern historians as American history. Certainly the frontier marked an enormously significant process: Europe's world conquest. A new epoch dawned in 1492, prompting, sixty years later, the Spanish historian Francisco López de Gómara, to state: "The discovery of the Indies, what we call the New World, is, excepting only

the Incarnation and death of our Lord, the most important event since the creation of the world."

López de Gómara saw clearly, for the New World's discovery helped create the Modern World. No territorial conquest in world history compares with Europe's penetration of four of the world's seven continents (plus the Indian subcontinent and other chunks of the Far East) within four centuries. No economic development rivals the prosperity enjoyed by Europeans as a consequence of their conquest and its attendant technological development. No social devastation equals the destruction suffered by indigenous cultures in conquered lands where European invaders imposed their own customs, civilization. With some justification, the English political philosopher Adam Smith could concur with López de Gómara, writing in *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, that the discovery of the New World and the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope to India were "the two greatest and most important events in the history of mankind."

Such earlier views support frontier historian Walter Prescott Webb's more recent contention that the "Great Frontier" largely shaped world history. Arguing that Europe, which Webb called the "Metropolis," sustained itself for 450 years by exploiting the lands and raw materials of the ever-advancing frontier, he discerned the social and economic direction of the modern world. He argued that "the frontier serves as the matrix of the modern world." The newfound New World had the goods, the raw materials, the fuels which "made modern dynamism possible and profitable." Like a dynamo the Metropolis burns up resources to supply the energy for a mechanical age. Europeans launched forth, wooed by wealth's luster; and the "combination of frontier wealth and metropolitan desire to have it carried modern materialism and determined the specialized character of the age." The Great Frontier "was like a great tree constantly casting down on the people of Europe windfalls, benefits which exacted little more than the exertion of getting out early, finding and carrying away the boom." With the wealth of the world pouring into its royal coffers and mercantile houses, Europe became what it is partially because of its world conquests.

The Great Frontier not only impacted Europe—it concurrently shaped European outposts in conquered lands. Given the evidence showing the influence of conquered lands upon Europe, the frontier affected those Europeans nearest it. Thus in North America, one segment of Europe's world conquest, the frontier slowly, indelibly marked the emergent *American* society.

Some of America's most thoughtful nineteenth century writers realized this. Whereas immigrants from Europe, and often their sons and grandsons too, imagined themselves pure (if transplanted) Europeans, some thinkers struggled for a cultural freedom from Europe which would sustain them in this world. James Fenimore Cooper's intuitive insights into America's essence emerge in the Leatherstocking saga: frontiersman Natty

Bumpo fuses Indian traits with his European stock to become an archetypal American. Henry David Thoreau's quest for transcendental reality drew him into the woods, delving westward in search of aboriginal truth, spending his later years diligently researching his uncompleted "Indian book." Walt Whitman's songs celebrate the wilds, the West, the wonder of America; as the nation's premier poet he identifies not with a bleached-out Europe but with the creative impulses he detected in pre-Civil War America. And Francis Parkman, seeking a subject fit for his genius, selected the conflict between France and England in North America, sensing that something of great import had transpired in the vast forest of North America.

Given this powerful nineteenth century intellectual ferment which recognized the West as America's distinctive region, Frederick Jackson Turner did not so much design a new theory as salvage and dramatically restate insights earlier offered by America's most gifted writers. For the embryonic historical profession, steeped in Teutonic scientism and bent toward Anglophilia, Turner's 1893 presentation to the American Historical Association, entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," proved pivotal. The insights of Cooper and Thoreau, of Whitman and Parkman, thereby entered the historical narratives and textbooks as the nation's historians acknowledged the frontier as the place where Europeans began to become Americans.

Turner's truth endures, like Webb's, because it blends intuition with data, poetic with scientific perspectives. As such it endures, and this is Turner's truth: the frontier helped forge the American character. "The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic Coast," he said, "it is the Great West." People from the frontier, Turner argued, infused democratic principles and individualism into the nation's bloodstream. Many would like to think of John Winthrop, Cotton Mather and John Adams as authentic Americans. But America's real "founding fathers" did not draft declarations or compose constitutions. They were, as Richard Slotkin recently wrote in accord with Turner, men who "tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness—the rogues, adventurers and land-boomers; the Indian fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness. . . ."

In sharing Turner's perspective, however, Slotkin enlarges it. The frontier experience involved not only the Europeans who forged into the wilderness—it included "the Indians themselves, both as they were and as they appeared to be to the settlers, for whom they were a special demonic personification of the American wilderness." The frontier thesis which considers only the European component needs to be extended and amended to include the Indian contribution. More than land, people—indigenous people—formed the frontier. To many frontier historians the frontier meant land, natural resources, unending economic opportunity. Indigenous people were lightly treated by historians concerned with the West and almost

totally forgotten by historians looking across the Atlantic for clues to this nation's identity. When recognized, they were simply the "Indian barrier" to European or Anglo-American advance. Yet in many ways indigenous people, as well as land, were the frontier.

Walter Prescott Webb described a Great Frontier which swept across continents sparsely populated by primitive Peoples who counted for little more than the rivers and mountains the pioneers surmounted. Important changes took place as frontiersmen had to adapt to their environment, but the changes were primarily the result of geographic conditions. The frontier's enormous importance, he thought, stemmed mainly from the material wealth of exploited lands. In truth, as recent demographic studies of the Americas show, European invaders simply took lands from their aboriginal residents. The great conquest of this continent, a contemporary American historian who has devoted his attention to Indian history, Wilbur R. Jacobs, says, amounts to "an invasion of Europeans into areas that were even more densely settled than parts of Europe." Pioneers faced and responded to people as well as places on the frontier.

Francis Parkman certainly discussed the Indians of North America. Granted his explicit bias favoring Anglo-American civilization, his portrait of Native Americans shows knowledge if not empathy. He simply judged Indians, along with the Catholic French, to be threats to the ultimate success of a free, prosperous, Protestant United States of America. Thus he celebrated the due demise of both the French and the Indians. Parkman failed, in my view, to see that the French were not the sole threat, perhaps not even the major threat, to English supremacy on this continent. France's Native American allies need to be recognized for their strength and importance rather than imagined as childish pawns of the French. The Indians, who always outnumbered their French colleagues, used the French in their efforts to defend their lands just as surely as the French used the Indians to further their colonial endeavors. Thus England's Edmund Atkin, who was the Superintendent for Southern Indians before the American Revolution, and who was entrusted with enforcing the Proclamation of 1763 which restricted English settlers to lands east of the Appalachian Mountains, recognized "the importance of the Indians," for he said "the prosperity of our Colonies on the Continent, will stand or fall with our Interest and favour among them." Fortunately for the English, the Iroquois and other strong Indian nations had sided with the English and helped them win the French and Indian War.

Had a French-Indian alliance prevailed (considering France's restrictive colonization policies and the Frenchmen's tendency to integrate into Native cultures), North America would have developed differently both because of its French connection and its Indian composition. Parkman did not underestimate the significance of the struggle for North America that took place in the forests of the continent, but in limiting the struggle to European powers he failed to emphasize the concurrent conflict waged between the

land's ancient residents and English invaders. For had English immigration ceased in 1763, had French policies preserved Indian lands and allowed Native population growth and cultural development to conjoin French ambitions, North America's story would be more thoroughly Indian.

Frederick Jackson Turner mentions the Indians as explicitly as Parkman. Repeatedly, he shows that as frontiersmen struggled to survive in their conquered land they relapsed into "barbarism" and adopted Native American ways. He graphically described this frontier process:

The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnished, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails.

Yet, having so imaginatively described this process, Turner immediately ascribes the stimuli for America's unique development to the sheer presence of the wilderness. Like others of his generation, highly influenced by Darwin's theory of natural selection, Turner tended to think exclusively of adaptation to one's physical surroundings. The Indian is there (He is part of the wilderness), but he contributes no more to the frontier's development than the pure air which recedes as "civilization" advances. Absent from Turner's analysis is any recognition of the significance of Native American Peoples and cultures.

But in criticizing the frontier thinkers for not fully appreciating the Indians' importance, we must laud them for noticing their existence. If nothing else, they were a barrier to European expansion. They were there. Perusing other analyses of the American character, reading other renditions of the American experience, one finds Native Americans evident chiefly by way of omission. In 1970 a team of thirty-two Indian scholars examined more than 300 textbooks used in the nation's public schools. "Not one could be approved as a dependable source of knowledge about the history and culture of the Indian people in America," they concluded. Celebrated scholarly works reveal the same. In *The Age of Jackson*, for example, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., says nothing about Andrew Jackson's Indian removal policies which dislocated 125,000 Native people!

With peculiar lack of concern for "primitive" cultures, and ignoring the presence and worth of another more ancient, more settled people, America's historians have frequently failed to consider and value the Indian's role in

this nation's history. Bernard DeVoto, Harvard historian and noted student of the American West, declared three decades ago that

Most American history has been written as if history were a function solely of white culture—in spite of the fact that till well into the nineteenth century the Indians were one of the principle determinants of historical events. Those of us who work in frontier history . . . are repeatedly nonplused to discover how little has been done for us in regard to the one force bearing on our field that was active everywhere. Disregarding Parkman's great example, American historians have made shockingly little effort to understand the life, the societies, the cultures, the thinking, and the feelings of the Indians, and disastrously little effort to understand how all these affected white men and their societies.

Though things have changed since DeVoto wrote these words, in some ways his indictment still stands. To be sure, derogatory labels have been expunged from textbooks and sympathetic sections surveying the Indian's experience have been added. But at the interpretative level where we form our perspectives, Indians are rarely considered. Yet their role in American history needs recognition if the nation's cultural texture is to be clearly seen.

Some observers from abroad have discerned the significance of Indians. They sensed a mysterious molding power that Native Americans exerted upon the country. It seems self-evident that Europeans could not have survived on this continent without drawing upon the accumulated wisdom of its Indians. Carl Jung, one of this century's creative pilgrims of the mind, repeatedly claimed that Indians significantly shaped America's psyche. "North Americans have maintained the European level with the strictest possible puritanism," he said, "yet they could not prevent the souls of their Indian enemies from becoming theirs." For land and its indigenous cultures mold people. There is a "mystery" to the "soil of every country," and "just as there is a relationship of mind to body, so there is a relationship of body to earth." Consequently, he argued, even some physical characteristics "of all the European races begin to indianize themselves in the second generation of immigrants. That is the mystery of the American earth." He discerned the emergence of a "Yankee" character, flowering forth from the "predominantly Germanic population" which conquered the land—Yankees revealing "the mysterious indianization of the American people" which he later found buried in the unconscious minds of his American patients.

Rivaling such foreign observers, some creative American writers have insisted the Indian's full stature in American history must be granted before we can understand ourselves as a People. One of America's finest twentieth century poets, William Carlos Williams, exclaimed:

History begins for us with murder and enslavement, not discovery. No, we are not Indians but we are men of their world. The blood means nothing, the spirit, the ghost of the land moves in the blood, moves the blood.

A noted contemporary literary critic, Leslie Fiedler, having listened carefully to creative writers past and present, asserts, "everyone who thinks of himself as being in some sense an American feels the stirrings in him of a second soul, the soul of the Red Man." Just as the name "American" originally applied strictly to Native Americans, only in time becoming a self-descriptive term for European immigrants, so too other aspects of the culture and personality of the Indian gained imprint on the scroll of America's heritage and character.

Some recent historians have embraced this perspective. Thus Francis Jennings, in an important interpretative work, *The Invasion of America*, argues:

Modern American society evolved from that web of interrelationship [between Englishmen and Indians], and if much of the Indian contribution is not immediately visible nowadays, neither is very much of the Anglo-Saxon. We are not less the offspring of our ancestors because their bodies have been buried.

"Modern America" grew out of "colonial America." Without the "colonial mold" today's culture would be quite different. In that epoch, Indians helped in the "exploration, development, settlement and cultivation of the continent." While we usually consider only Europeans "pioneers," they actually "were pupils in the Indian school," for Natives contributed "the experience and knowledge of millennia of genuine pioneering." Thus, simply stated, Jennings says: "What American society owes to Indian society, as much as to any source, is the mere fact of its existence."

More than land the frontier included people. While certain sections were sparsely populated, no "free land," no empty space existed on this continent if one recognizes aboriginal land title. The frontier, in fact, marked the place where cultures met, where interaction and exchange transpired. Frontier historians have highlighted great truth: the frontier was important. But it was important not only because it marked a geographic boundary, for in America the emergent *American way*, to the extent it differed from Europe's, reflects the experience and wisdom of the ancient, rooted, land-wise Native American cultures as well as the challenging land itself.

From this vantage point the frontier saga further needs re-thinking and re-telling in ways more appreciative of the Indian's significance in American history. Europeans in touch with Native Americans embraced many of their ways to survive, for despite their technological prowess they lacked the ecological wisdom needed to survive in the New World. Struggling to stay alive, they found many Indian ways preferable to those of Europe, even if they failed to acknowledge their source. Much about the frontier experience, and thus about American history, becomes more intelligible when seen with Indian dimensions. To make this evident, let us briefly consider only four examples: exploration; fur trade; agriculture; and medicine. Each example

could be treated at length, and many more examples could be cited, but these four will suffice.

While European "explorers" have been repeatedly extolled and their importance recognized, virtually none of them travelled without Indian guides over Indian trails and waterways. Immediately after landing on Hispanola, Christopher Columbus took aboard Indian guides to help him navigate the nearby islands. Hernando De Soto and Francisco de Coronado, sweeping through vast reaches of North America, continually employed and depended upon Native guides. The daring Verendryes, father and sons, who journeyed far beyond the Great Lakes across the Dakotas to the Black Hills, went nowhere without Indian guides and turned back on one trip when their guides refused to go farther. Such explorers certainly saw country which was new to them, and, most importantly, reported their journeys, but the American continent had long been "opened" and charted by those Native hunters and traders who had actually explored it. While we often concentrate on the "explorers," *who* they were was less consequential than *what* they learned. They learned what their Native guides showed them, so the content of explorers' accounts came from Indian sources. The trails, mountain passes, navigable streams, etc., which enabled Americans to press westward, were revealed to them by Native Americans. Without Native guides few "explorers" would have survived to share their discoveries.

Following the explorers, the fur traders helped make America. Men like George Croghan and Jim Bridger, riding point along the frontier from the sixteenth century onwards, certainly helped open western lands to European settlers. But they were properly called *fur traders*. The furs themselves which provided such a profit for men and companies were largely gathered by Indians and traded at posts which they allowed to flourish on their lands. To the extent the celebrated "mountain men" mastered the mountains, they did so by learning how to hunt and trap like Indians. In granting the fur trade's great significance, for it was a major industry in colonial days and provides a major chapter in the development of the American West, those Indians who provided the furs and taught Anglo-Americans how to survive on the land must be recognized.

Indians gave American agriculture some of its distinctiveness. This is rather well known if inadequately appreciated. The work of Native agronomists, carefully cross-breeding and cultivating diverse strains of such crops as maize, potatoes, beans, tobacco and cotton, has proved enduringly significant: Europeans and their descendants have done little to domesticate wild indigenous plants. They simply took the Indian-domesticated varieties and profited from them. They also imitated Indian agricultural methods, especially in growing maize which became and continues to be one of the most essential New World food crops. Indian food crops, properly tended, harvested, stored and freely shared with Europeans, certainly shaped the economic and social structures of America and of the world as well.

Less widely appreciated is the Indian achievement in medicine. Native medicines, often more effective (or at least less lethal) than those prescribed by European doctors, frequently underlay the "folk" medicine and home remedies of frontier families. Indian awareness of the need for such things as vitamin C, for example, preceded its European discovery by two centuries. With a vast knowledge of indigenous herbs Native American healers have, as Virgil Vogel so nicely shows, added much to our knowledge of drugs, healing and health.

To mention exploration, fur trade, agriculture and medicine is not to exhaust the list of American Indian contributions to the material culture of North America. The growing body of literature delineates such contributions, though much remains to be done. (For example, no definitive study of Indian agriculture, based upon both historical documents and agronomy, has been produced, despite the importance of the subject.) Such contributions deserve considerable elaboration, and doing so would expand one's awareness of this nation's real roots. Doing so would also increase one's appreciation for the wisdom and integrity of "primitive" peoples who were so often sophisticated and perceptive in their adaptation to their world.

Better understanding of whom Native Peoples were and what happened to them helps one see how their lifestyles and values impregnated colonial and national cultures in America. Beyond the more clearly evident contributions to the nation's material culture one can glimpse some non-material contributions to its character. The English language, for example, has become laced with Indian words and expressions—the Choctaw word "Okay" being an obvious example. The love of freedom noticed by so many observers in Indian society certainly influenced the commitment to freedom which distinguishes the American tradition.

Some have even suggested that there is a sense in which the prototypical Americans have been in some ways yoked to the Indian example. The national hero of the nineteenth century was Daniel Boone, not only a bold frontiersman but one who, even if forced "to become an Indian," was authentically *American*. Evaluating the nation's literature and imaginatively constructing the people's evolution from Daniel Boone to the "hippies" of the 1960s, literary critic Leslie Fiedler says:

... We are tempted to say that it is the woodsman which the ex-European becomes beside his Red companion: the hunter, the trapper, the frontiersman, the pioneer, at last the cowboy—or maybe only next-to-last, for after him comes the beatnik, the hippie, one more wild man seeking the last West of Haight-Ashbury in high-heeled boots and blue jeans. But even as he ceases to be beatnik and becomes fully hippie, the ultimate Westerner ceases to be White at all and turns back into the Indian, his boots becoming moccasins, his hair bound in an Indian headband, and a string of beads around his neck—to declare that he has fallen not merely out of Europe, but out of the Europeanized West, into an aboriginal and archaic America.

Perhaps, as D. H. Lawrence insisted, in tune with Carl Jung, a "Spirit of Place" exerts its influence over any people who settle there. "A curious thing," Lawrence said, "about the Spirit of Place is the fact that no place exerts its full influence upon a newcomer until the old inhabitant is dead or absorbed. So America." He sensed that "the demon of the place and the unappeared ghost of the dead Indians act within the unconscious or under-conscious soul of the white American," shaping the national character. So perhaps Vachel Lindsay spoke truly in "Our Mother Pocahontas":

The forest, arching low and wide
Gloried in its Indian bride . . .
John Rolfe is not our ancestor:
We rise from out the soul of her . . .
We here renounce our Saxon blood . . .
We here renounce our Teuton pride;
Italian dreams are swept away,
And Celtic feuds are lost today . . .

Interestingly enough, just as Hellenic culture in time conquered those Romans who conquered Greece, so too the indigenous cultures in conquered lands have altered and may well progressively transform the transplanted "civilization" of Europe. If, in time, Europe's mechanistic system proves artificial and ill-adapted to the natural world, some Indians (such as the Hopi) think more authentic, better-rooted, more nurturing, more Indian-like ways may ultimately prevail as overextended and shrinking European empires collapse.

Many historians writing and thinking about American history from an Indian vantage point find it impossible to evade the "moral" issues interwoven with any treatment of Native American peoples. Indian history often sounds like a revolving disc describing, again and again, the loss of lands, of lives, of cultures and traditions. Like the history of the sturdy *kulaks* Stalin liquidated in the 1930s or the Palestinians cast into exile by the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, Native American history defies dispassionate, detached discussion. When reporting lives taken or property stolen or vows broken, historians unfailingly reveal moral perspectives. Persons write as they think, making moral judgments. Moral commitments and perspectives do not negate historical accuracy, however. Without certain moral values, demanding, for example, truth-telling from one's sources and colleagues, the effort to write history would be no more valuable than the aimless gossip which flourishes in salacious newspapers.

A father reporting the rape of his daughter, for example, could truthfully report the crime. He could very well be the best witness, insofar as he could clearly identify and have the courage to testify against her assailant. He need not be dispassionate or detached. Indeed, we would expect him to be morally outraged if he cares for his daughter and judges rape wrong.

Were he, however, to blandly state his observations, disclosing no disapproval, his moral views would also be evident, for in failing to censure he would thereby discount or even approve the act.

This is not to say moral perspectives must be strident and hysterical with outrage (as have some accounts of Indian history). They can hardly avoid being somewhat polemical, for a moral stance is, after all, a stance. Though strong beliefs and commitments can be asserted without incessant blanning (more especially heaping guilt on wrongdoers' descendants), one ought to expect more polemical views in writing about the Jewish Holocaust (one should think) than in an account of the inner working of the Social Security Administration. So when dealing with what seem to be enormous crimes, particularly when dealing with what qualifies as genocide, a certain moral fervor must be expected. Thus Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* contains more truth than Soviet historians' pronouncements on the labor camps; his moral indignation does not negate the truth of his testimony.

Historians need to tell Indian history from a "moral" standpoint, as Wilcomb Washburn insists. Historical treaties which smack of special pleading (exemplified in works from Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Century of Dishonor* to Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*) fill an important place in American history. If killing and stealing, violence and deception, enslaving and exploiting be wrong, Europe's world conquests were decidedly wrong. From an Indian perspective, great wrong was done and went unpunished. Within 400 years Europeans conquered most of the world, wielding a mechanistic philosophy as well as deadly machines. Propelled by the same motives, they employed the same tactics as had Romans, Moslems and Mongols who had earlier forged vast empires. Though often acclaimed as a great step in "man's progress," Europe's world conquests rather appear to be a massive seizure of land and resources from Native Peoples. Settlers who followed Columbus to North America were often violent ruffians whose descendants molded the United States into what the French observer Alexis de Tocqueville called, a century and a half ago, the "most grasping nation on the globe." The greed, evident in Hernando Cortes' 1519 conquest to Montezuma that an incurable hunger for gold consumed him, endured until America's frontier closed, prompting Sitting Bull, the Lakota holy man, to note in 1877 that the Americans' "love of possession is a disease with them." Indians enduring the frontier's advance thought in moral terms—as did the frontiersmen who rationalized their own aggression.

In such densely populated areas as Mexico Europeans obviously took occupied land. Even in less densely populated regions Europeans invaded an "inhabited land." "Had it been a pristine wilderness then," Francis Jennings says, "it would have remained so, for Europeans lacked the capacity to maintain" distant colonies. While the invaders lacked wilderness skills, however, they knew how to conquer and control people. "They did

not settle a virgin land." In truth, "The American land was more like a widow than a virgin. Europeans did not find a wilderness here; rather, however involuntarily, they made one." Thus, "The so-called settlement of America was a resettlement, a reoccupation of land made waste by diseases and demoralization introduced by the newcomers."

Seeking precious metals and consumable goods, the invaders' quest evoked violence against the People who had the goods. If one believes such defenders of resident Peoples as Bartholome de Las Casas in the sixteenth century or Benjamin Keen today, Spanish conquistadores dislodged and destroyed millions of Native Americans as they occupied vast areas in the Americas. Similarly, the English assaulted Native Peoples, waging wars and staging removals throughout three centuries. Thus Washington Irving, one of this nation's finest nineteenth century writers, sampling "partial narratives" of the conquest, found it "painful to perceive . . . how the footsteps of civilization may be traced in the blood of aborigines; how easily the colonists were moved to hostility by the lust of conquest; how merciless and exterminating was their warfare." Many Indians died violently. More died as a result of the disruption, dislocation and disease which accompanied their loss of homelands. Some scholars now estimate that upwards of 90% of North and South America's Natives perished as a consequence of European conquest.

While displacing indigenous Peoples, Europeans simultaneously exploited the world's natural resources. Mining Mother Earth to promote Europe's prosperity, a host of frontiersmen and technicians scouted out and extracted vast amounts of the world's resources. Given a mechanistic philosophy (early evident in such men as Galileo, Hobbes and Descartes), they reduced "reality" to matter-in-motion and excluded intrinsic value from nature; they wrenched raw materials from the earth and ignored any harm inflicted upon her. Consequently, as a host of highly moralistic ecological treatises proclaim, the history of the world since 1492 bears witness to the conquest and exploitation of the planet to elevate living standards and insure the comfort of those who control the political and economic processes of the West. Thinking and writing about environmental as well as Indian history inevitably involves us in making moral judgments.

Indian history helps balance the typically nationalistic bias of many American history books. The positive evaluations usually given European immigration and westward expansion need the corrective which comes from thinking about the ethical issues involved as well as trying to see such processes from an Indian perspective. The careers of outstanding Americans such as George Washington, Andrew Jackson and William Tecumseh Sherman take on somewhat different dimensions when seen from an Indian viewpoint. Various administrators' Indian policies often reveal guiding (if disguised) political values. Quite simply, the history of the American Indian

is significant because it reveals much about the character of those Europeans who conquered this land.

We have seen that some highly gifted thinkers challenge us, as we seek to know what is *American*, to find what is authentic to this land. We must rediscover and reclaim whatever roots anchor us to this place. By responding to the challenge of poets and scholars who, in the past, have stressed the importance of Native American history and culture, historians may both appreciate and amend the frontier thesis as one of the clues to understanding the inner dynamic of this nation's history. And, perhaps, if we seek to be truly American, we must both acknowledge and become, in some ways, the Indian.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What is an American? Why are Americans harder to define than people from many other nations?
2. What was Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis?
3. What role did the Indians play in the European exploration of America? In the fur trade? In agriculture? In medicine?
4. In what areas do moral judgments necessarily arise in dealing with Indian history? Why?
5. How does American history written from an Indian perspective differ from that written from a Euro-American viewpoint?